

Cotter at the Crossroads

A community
grappling with a
uranium mill's past,
present and future



Penny Steadman, left, and Mike Stiehl look through grapevines outside their home in Cañon city. They bought their house in the Lincoln Park area of Cañon City under the pretense that it was a "gardener's delight," as it was advertised. They later found out about the area's status as a contaminated site. Times-Call/ Jeff Haller

A shattered dream

By Jackie Hutchins

The Daily Record News Group

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CA ÑON CITY - When Mike Stiehl and his wife Penny Steadman bought a house in the rural, apple-tree lined Lincoln Park neighborhood on Ca ñon City's south side in the July 2001, they thought they had found their own little slice of solitude to settle into.

The house, which they paid \$133,500 for, sat on about half an acre and had a huge woodworking shop and room for a garden, as well as an adjacent well for watering the flowers and vegetables.

Then five months later, the bomb dropped on the dream.

"I didn't know there was a Superfund site here," said Stiehl.

He said that during the process of buying the house, no one ever disclosed to him and his wife that the Cotter Corp. operated a uranium mill just 2 miles to the south, or that their home at 1621 Elm Ave. sat in the middle of a Superfund cleanup site.

The Lincoln Park Superfund site was contaminated by both uranium and molybdenum that emanated into the neighborhood from leaking tailings ponds at Cotter's mill - although the Environmental Protection Agency determined that the contamination plumes had receded from the vicinity of the couple's home in 1999.

Stiehl, who had been living in Colorado Springs, did remember hearing about concerns involving the uranium-processing facility back in the 1970s. So in mid-June, prior to closing on the house, he asked his Realtor if it was in "the Cotter disaster area."

The agent told him that the contamination was in another part of town, Stiehl said, so he and Steadman decided to buy their home. They closed on July 13, 2001.

After they learned in early November that their property was in the Superfund site and that their well might be contaminated, they quit using it.

Their home is hooked up to the city water system, but they had intended to use well water for their garden.

"We're not gardening. We're a little afraid of the water," Stiehl said.

Confused about their future, the couple left their new

home, left Ca on City and moved back to Colorado Springs to live in late January, then later returned to try to sort out the mess with their home.

Their situation became murkier in February when Stiehl found out about Cotter's plan to dispose of mildly radioactive Superfund soil from Maywood, N.J. in the mill's tailings impoundments. Now he and Steadman worry not only about existing contamination, but the potential for more.

"That was kind of the last straw," he said.

Stiehl said has searched for answers but thinks studies by the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment have focused too much on cancer and not enough on the other health problems that exposure to heavy metals can create.

"I was worried about dust. I tried to investigate what kind of air sampling Cotter was doing," he said. "I couldn't get an answer on that."

Stiehl and Steadman had purchased their home from the company that sold the previous owners a new home. He wrote to the Realtor who completed his deal to complain about not having received disclosures about Cotter or the Superfund designation from him.

He said the Realtor wrote back saying there had been considerable publicity about the Cotter issues, and that he thought Stiehl and Steadman should have known.

The local Association of Realtors advises its members to disclose whether properties are in the Superfund area.

Stiehl said he doesn't know what the couple's next move will be. His attorney suggested that they approach the seller and ask him to take the property back, but Stiehl and Steadman don't like the idea of having nowhere to go.

"We don't know what to do," he said. "We're really torn."

They also think suing the Realtor, whom Stiehl declined to name, would be a protracted process with no satisfaction.

So, now they are doing what they had planned all along, fixing up their house and personalizing it, "but doing it with an eye to resale."

Stiehl said if he sells the house he will make sure the new buyers know about the Superfund site and the contamination. He just wishes he and Steadman had

been given that information - and the opportunity to weigh that information - before they decided to buy.

"We would not have had to face the decision we've had to make here, we're still having to make," he said.

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